

# THE CHINESE GEOMANCER

The man I had arranged to meet was standing by one of the two bronze lions that snarl in the forecourt of the new Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. He wore a blue silk Nina Ricci tie, a gold wristwatch with a crocodile strap, and an immaculate worsted grey suit.

He handed me his card on which was written, in embossed letters:

LUNG KING CHUEN

Geomancer

*Searching and fixing of good location for the burial  
of passed-away ancestors; surveying and arranging  
of good position for settling down business and  
lodging places, in which would gain prosperity and  
luck in the very near future*

The building – to which workmen were adding the final touches – has forty-seven storeys (including the helipad on the roof) and stands on the site of the Bank's former Head Office – overlooking the Cenotaph, on the south side of Victoria Square. It is the work of the English architect, Norman Foster, and is, by any standards, an astonishing performance.

I heard the bank called, variously, 'The shape of things to come'; 'An act of faith in Hong Kong's future'; 'Something out of *Star Wars*'; 'A cathedral to money'; 'A maintenance nightmare', and 'Suicides' leap'.

Having exceeded its budget three times over, to the tune of \$600 million U.S., the new Hongkong and Shanghai Bank has also earned the distinction of being the most expensive office block ever built.

Architecturally, I felt it was less a 'vision of the future' than a backward, not to say nostalgic look at certain experiments of the Twenties (when buildings were modelled on battleships, and Man himself was thought to be a perfectible machine): buildings such as the PROUNS of El Lissitzky; Vesnin's project for the offices of *Pravda* — the unrealised dreams of the Early Soviet Constructivists.

Mr Lung, on the other hand, is a modest practitioner of the venerable Chinese art of geomancy, or *feng-shui*. At the start of the project, the Bank called him in to survey the site for malign or demonic presences, and to ensure that the design itself was propitious. Whichever architect was chosen, there was bound to be some anxiety; for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank is the pivot on which Hong Kong itself stands or falls. With 1997 in sight, prosperity and luck must either come 'in the very near future' — or not at all.

The afternoon was overcast and a sharp wind was blowing off the harbour. We rode the escalator to the first floor, and took shelter in the Cash Department. It was like entering a war-machine: the uniform grey, the absence of 'art', the low hum of computerised activity. It was also cold. Had the building been put up in Soviet Russia there would at least have been a touch of red.

Behind a gleaming black counter sat the tellers — unscreened and unprotected, since, in the event of a bank-raid, a kind of portcullis slices sideways into action, and traps the raiders inside. A few potted palms were positioned here and there, apparently at random.

I sat down on a slab of black marble which, in less austere surroundings, might have been called a banquette. Mr Lung was not a tall man. He stood.

Obviously, the surroundings were too austere for many of

the Bank's personnel, and already — in the executive suites on high — they had unrolled the Persian carpets, and secretaries sat perched on reproduction Chippendale chairs.

'This', Mr Lung began, in a proprietorial tone, 'is one of the Top Ten Buildings of the World. Its construction is particularly ingenious.'

'It is,' I nodded, glancing up at the cylindrical pylons and the colossal X-shaped cross-braces that keep the structure rigid.

'So first,' he continued, 'I would like to emphasise its good points. As far as *feng-shui* is concerned, the situation is perfect. It is, in fact, the best situation in the whole of Hong Kong.'

*Feng-shui* means 'wind-and-water'. From the most ancient times the Chinese have believed that the Earth is a mirror of the Heavens, and that both are living sentient beings shot through and through with currents of energy — some positive, some negative — like the messages that course through our own central nervous systems.

The positive currents — those carrying good '*chi*', or 'life force' — are known as 'dragon-lines'. They are thought to follow the flow of underground water, and the direction of magnetic fields beneath the Earth's surface.

The business of a geomancer is to make certain, with the help of a magnetic compass, that a building, a room, a grave or a marriage-bed is aligned to one or other of the 'dragon-lines' and shielded from dangerous cross-currents. Without clearance from a *feng-shui* expert, even the most 'westernised' Chinese businessman is apt to get the jitters, to say nothing of his junior staff.

At a lunch I happened to tell an 'old China hand', an Englishman, that the Bank had taken the advice of a geomancer.

'Yes,' he replied. 'It's the kind of thing *they* would believe in.'

Yet we all feel that some houses are 'happy' and others have a 'nasty atmosphere'. Only the Chinese have come up with

cogent reasons why this should be so. Whoever presumes to mock *feng-shui* as a superstitious anachronism should recall its vital contribution to the making of the Chinese landscape, in which houses, temples and cities were always sited in harmony with trees and hills and water.

Perhaps one can go a step further? Perhaps the *rootedness* of Chinese civilisation; the Chinese sense of belonging to the Earth; their capacity to live without friction in colossal numbers – have all, in the long run, resulted from their adherence to the principles of *feng-shui*?

'Now it so happens,' Mr Lung said, 'that no less than five "dragon-lines" run down from The Peak and converge on the Central Business District of Hong Kong.'

We looked across the atrium of glass, towards the skyscrapers of the most expensive patch of real estate in the world.

Some of the lines, he went on – not by any means all – were punctuated here and there with 'dragon-points' or 'energy-centres', like the meridian-points known to acupuncturists: points at which a particularly potent source of *chih* was known to gush to the surface.

'And the site on which the bank stands', he added, 'is one of them. It is, in fact, the only "dragon-point" on the entire length of the line.'

Other lines, too, were known to have branches, like tap-roots, which tended to siphon off the flow of *chih*, and diminish its force.

'But this line', he said, 'has no branches.'

Yet another favourable point was the bank's uninterrupted view of the mountain. Had there been naked rocks or scree, they might have reflected bad *chih* into the building.

'But The Peak', he said solemnly, 'is covered in trees.'

Similarly, because the new building was set well back from the waterfront – and because the sun's course passed to landward – no malign glitter could rise up from the sea.

Mr Lung liked the grey colour which, he felt, was soothing

to the nerves. He also liked the fact that the building absorbed light, and did not reflect glare onto its neighbours.

I questioned him carefully on the subject of reflected glare, and discovered that glass-curtain-wall buildings which mirror one another – as they do in every American city, and now in Hong Kong – are, from a *feng-shui* point of view, disastrous. 'If you reflect bad *chih* onto your neighbours,' Mr Lung said, 'you cannot prosper either.'

He also approved of the two bronze lions that used to guard the entrance of the earlier building. During the War, he said, the Japanese had tried to melt them down:

'But they were not successful.'

I said there were similar lions in London, outside the Bank of England.

'They cannot be as good as these two,' he answered sharply: so sharply, in fact, that I forgot to ask whether the lions had been put away in storage three years ago, when Mrs Thatcher made her first, ill-informed foray into Chinese politics – and gave the Hong Kong Stock Exchange its major nervous breakdown.

The result, of course, was the historic slap from Deng Xiaoping himself.

'So what about the bad points?' I asked Mr Lung.

'I'm coming to them now,' he said.

The Hong Kong waterfront was built on reclaimed land and there were stories . . . No. He could not confirm them but there were, nevertheless, stories . . . of sea-monsters and other local ghouls, who resented being dumped upon and might want to steal into the building.

This was why he had recommended that the escalator to the first floor – which was, after all, the main public entrance – should be so angled, obliquely, that it ran along a 'dragon-line'. The flow of positive *chih* would thus drive the demons back where they belonged.

Furthermore, since all good *chih* came from the landward, he had advised that the Board Room and Chief Executive

offices should turn away from the sea: away, that is, from the view of Kowloon and the mountains of China; away from the cargo-ships, tugboats, ferries, drifters, coaling-barges, junks; away from the White Ensign, Red Ensign and that 'other' red flag – and turn instead to face the 'Earth Spirit' descending from The Peak.

The same, equally, applied to the underground Safe Deposit – which has the largest, circular, stainless-steel door ever made.

Finally, Mr Lung said, he had to admit there were a number of danger zones in the structure – 'killing-points' is what he called them – where, in order to counteract negative *chih*, it had been necessary to station living plants: a potted palm at the head of the escalator 'in case of a fall'; more potted palms by the lift-shafts; yet more palms close to the pylons to nullify the colossal downward thrust of the building.

'Right,' I said. 'I'd like to ask you one thing. I believe that "dragon-lines" never run straight, but are curved.'

'True,' he said.

'And isn't it also true that traditional Chinese buildings are almost always curved? The roofs are curved? The walls are curved?'

'Yes.'

Chinese architecture – like Chinese art, Chinese language and the Chinese character – abhors the rigid and rectilinear.

'Now, as a *feng-shui* man,' I persisted, 'how would you interpret this rigid, straight-up-and-down Western architecture? Would you say it had good or bad *chih*?'

He blanched a little, and said nothing.

'These cross-braces, for example? Good or bad? Would you consider putting plants underneath them?'

'No,' he said, blandly. 'Nobody sits there.'

My question, I have to confess, was most unfair, for I had heard on the grapevine that the cross-braces were terribly bad *feng-shui*.

It was obvious I had overstepped the mark. At the mere

mention of cross-braces, Mr Lung moved onto the defensive. He back-pedalled. He smiled. He re-emphasised the good points, and glossed over the bad ones. He even left the impression that there were no bad ones.

At the foot of the escalator he shook my hand and said:

'I have done *feng-shui* for Rothschilds.'